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Cleo Colburn Oral History Interview: Polar Bear Oral History Project

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POLAR BEAR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Mr. Cleo Merritt Colburn

The Hope College Polar Bear Oral History Project was conducted from summer 1977 through fall 1979. Three undergraduate History majors, Ms. Nancy Johnson, Ms. Deborah Lenning, and Mr. Glen Johnson, researched the American Intervention in the Russian civil war, located the survivors, and did the interviews. They also typed the rough drafts and attended to the many administrative details related to getting the manuscripts into final form. The latter task was cheerfully completed by departmental secretaries Myra Jordan and Carole Boeve and their assistants. The students worked under the general supervision of G.L. Penrose of the Department of History. Ultimately, the project depended upon the diligence of the students and upon the willing responses of the veterans.

Department of History
Hope College
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Mr. Cleo M. Colburn

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Preface

Interviewee: Mr. Cleo Merritt Colburn

Interview I: June 17, 1977
Mr. Colburn's home in Fruitport, Michigan

Interviewers: Ms. Deborah A. Lenning
Ms. Nancy L. Johnson
Associate Directors - Polar Bear Oral History Project
Hope College, Summer 1977

Biographical Sketch and Summary of Contents

Cleo Merritt Colburn was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan on July 6, 1895. His father, Merritt Lorenzo, was a carpenter and a farmer from New York. His mother, Sarah Josephine, was also born in Kalamazoo. Mr. Colburn was drafted into the U.S. Army at Muskegon, Michigan on June 23, 1918 and was sent to Camp Custer, near Battle Creek, Michigan, for basic training. He served as a corporal in Company "I" of the 339th Infantry Regiment. After three weeks of training at Camp Custer, his company boarded the U.S.S. Harrisburg and sailed to Liverpool, England. They continued training at Camp Stoney Castle and remained in England until August 26. While in England, Corporal Colburn was trained to be a machine gunner. On August 26, 1918, they set sail for Russia on the H.M.T. Somali, arriving at their destination, Archangel, on September 5, 1918.

As part of the Third Battalion, Mr. Colburn and his company immediately marched further south and soon were fighting the Bolsheviks. Company "I" participated in the fall campaign on the railroad front under the command of, first, Major Young, then Major J. Brooks Nichols. When relieved, they spent time in Archangel. Throughout most of the winter, they were on the front. On April 1, 1919, Corporal Colburn fought his last battle from the #1 Blockhouse at Verst 446, where he was taken ill from exposure and sent to Archangel for treatment.

He did not rejoin his company because he remained in the hospital until he was sent home. On June 25, 1919, he boarded the Red Cross Vessel U.S.S. Louisville, which was loaded with sick and wounded soldiers as well as war brides and war babies. After stopping in Brest, France on June 28-29, they continued their voyage to the United States. They docked at Hoboken, New Jersey on July 7, 1919. On July 14, Mr. Colburn was sent to the military

hospital at Fort Sheridan, Illinois, where he was discharged on August 30, 1919.

Following his discharge, Mr. Colburn attended Michigan Agricultural College in Lansing, after which he worked for the Muskegon Chronicle as carrier supervisor from June, 1926 until his retirement in 1962. On April 3, 1920 he was married to Jessie Maria Poulson of Fruitland Township. They have twin boys, Cleo Murrill and Gerald Burrill, born on [date removed], 1924. Cleo is now a field representative of the Telephone Branch of R.E.A., and Gerald is a dentist. Their daughter, Sandra Louise Duiker, born on [date removed], 1943, is a registered nurse.

Mr. and Mrs. Colburn now reside in Fruitport, Michigan. He is a charter member of the Captain Howard H. Pellegrom Polar Bear Post #3734 of Veterans of Foreign Wars. Cleo enjoys hunting, and his hobbies include antique furniture restoration and chair caning.

Although Mr. Colburn's interview was unfortunately abruptly ended by a visit from his son, it nevertheless contains detailed accounts of the battles at Obozerskaya and Verst 446, as well as other insights into the military situation in North Russia. All dates in his interview have been verified by entries in the diary which Mr. Colburn kept while serving in the American expedition to North Russia.

LENNING: Were you drafted or did you enlist for World War I?

COLBURN: I was drafted.

LENNING: When was that?

COLBURN: June 23, 1918, in Muskegon, Michigan.

LENNING: How did you feel about that?

COLBURN: It didn't bother me. Of course, one was concerned, but it was just one of the things you were obligated to do.

LENNING: Where were you trained?

COLBURN: Camp Custer, at Battle Creek.

LENNING: For how long?

COLBURN: June 24th to July 14, when we left Camp Custer. I left Camp Custer right after my birthday--July. It was late in July that we arrived in New York. Those dates I could verify if I could take time to go through my little diary that I have.

JOHNSON: You have a diary?

COLBURN: Yes, I do.

LENNING: How much did you learn in just a few weeks at Camp Custer?

COLBURN: Well, we learned our (laughs) orders, and our duties, and had rifle practice--which was very essential. Aside from that, you just carried out the orders of the day.

LENNING: Did you feel prepared for combat after those few weeks?

COLBURN: No, I don't think that anybody could feel they were prepared in that short time. We had a little bit of bayonet practice and knew what bayonet practice was and what bayonet tactics were. But as far as feeling prepared, nobody can be prepared for combat in three or four weeks, or a couple of months. You can't do it.

LENNING: Where did you think you would go after Camp Custer?

COLBURN: We had no idea until we got into England. And then from England we went to France. We spent one night in the harbor in France. From there--we didn't unload in France--then next morning we were sent to our destination, Archangel.

LENNING: What ship were you on?

COLBURN: We went across on the Harrisburg with about four thousand troops plus the crew.

LENNING: And then to Archangel?

COLBURN: Yes. There were several ships in the convoy. I can't recall the different names. We went from New York to England on the Harrisburg, and from there I con't recall what ships we were on.

LENNING: Do you have any impressions of England?

COLBURN: Oh yes. I thought England was a beautiful country, especially their architectural design of houses and their extensive use of their land. It was cropped right up to the railroad banks, or railroad tracks. And the houses, most of them were of the masonry construction--mostly vine-covered. Beautiful, beautiful homes.

LENNING: Did you continue training in England?

COLBURN: Oh, yes, we continued training while we were there. I don't recall much about being there--I'd have to go through my entire diary to know the various dates that I arrived in England, and Liverpool, and Scotland--Liverpool on the way over, Scotland on the way back. But I don't have those dates right at hand.

LENNING: That's okay. When did you first realize you were going to Russia?

COLBURN: After we spent the night in France.

LENNING: How did you find out?

COLBURN: Oh, I don't know. By the grapevine, I guess.

LENNING: What did you know about Russia at that time?

COLBURN: Nothing.

LENNING: What about Bolshevism?

COLBURN: Well, I knew nothing about that to begin with. You just learned about it after you got there, I guess.

LENNING: Did they give you any lectures to prepare you for what you'd encounter in Russia or prepare you in any way?

COLBURN: No, I don't recall that they did.

LENNING: What was the voyage to Russia like? Do you have any memories of that?

COLBURN: Well . . .One thing that's very vivid in my memory is--and this happened long before reaching Russia. The first day that I was in Camp Custer, I

picked a four-leaf clover, and the same in New York, and the same in England. Also on October 4, I picked another as we left Obozerskaya. I still have this one in my diary book. On our waiting period, on the side, I picked these four-leaf clovers. I don't know if that was an omen of good luck, or what. But of Russia, I can't think of anything special, except that it was bitter cold and most of the vegetation there was forest. And the railroad front which we were operating on was right through the forest. And it was virgin timber, perhaps fifty-sixty feet high and real thick. They weren't planted; it was virgin timber. The Russians fired all their locomotives with wood. The piles of wood that were along the railroad front were used as our blockhouses, instead of digging dugouts. We couldn't have dugouts because of high water level, so we used these piles of logs to make our blockhouses. There'd be a pile of logs the size of a house and inside there would only be room for a squad because we had all of this extra thickness for protection.

LENNING: Do you remember the Spanish flu epidemic on the voyage to Russia?

COLBURN: Very much. I don't recall the number of casualties, but I do recall that they were many, many. And the day before we unloaded we were all ordered to take a bath. Of course, there was no hot water, just ice water--and salt water at that. And a buddy and I got the idea of going down right away, and instead of going through the shower, we went right on through without taking a bath. We just changed our clothes and went on out through the other side. We were among the very first ones who did that, and we did not get the flu. Soon afterwards they began checking them in and out to make sure they did take a bath. But it was so darn cold you just couldn't bear it. The buddies who had died were unloaded at Archangel. I didn't see too much of this, but I knew of it. I knew what was happening.

LENNING: Do you remember if there were enough doctors to care for the sick men?

COLBURN: No, I don't know.

LENNING: Whose command were you under?

COLBURN: Do you mean the government? It was British. We were sent there by the British.

LENNING: Who was your company commander?

COLBURN: Captain Winslow.

LENNING: What do you remember about him?

COLBURN: Well, most vivid in my mind is, that when we had reached as far forward as we were to go--we were transported up there in boxcars--and all our rifles were up against the wall, and of course there was a lot of hilarity and fooling around in the boxcars. And the car door was open and my rifle was kicked out--lost. And of course we couldn't go back and get it. So when we unloaded for inspection, I didn't have a gun. Captain Winslow said to me, "You're in an awful predicament to go into battle." So he gave me a sidearm, and I carried that. I didn't have any need for it at that time. On our march forward, I found a rifle in the woods that was usable--the same type we were using and it used the same ammunition. So then I had a rifle again.

JOHNSON: After you debarked at Bakaritsa, you left immediately for Obozerskaya. What did you experience there?

COLBURN: The station?

JOHNSON: Yes.

COLBURN: As I recall, it was a partially destroyed railroad station at Obozer-

skaya.

JOHNSON: Is that where you first encountered fighting with the Bolsheviks?

COLBURN: Yes. My first engagement was at Obozerskaya. It was the night after we went forward in the afternoon. After we unloaded, we marched through the woods all night, across swamps and streams. When we stopped to rest in the night, of course you couldn't lie down, so I took my belt and wrapped it around a tree and around myself and slung in that for probably a half-hour's sleep. It was about five o'clock in the morning when we got the order to advance. We went forward for about, oh maybe, a hundred yards. We got the order to fall down, and as we lay there behind logs, or stumps, or whatever we could use as a barricade, we could see the Bolsheviks advancing behind pine trees-little pine trees that they had cut off. They were carrying these ahead of them.

MRS. COLBURN: They must have been reading Shakespeare. That's in Shakespeare.

JOHNSON: Did you think that night march was adequately planned?

COLBURN: I had no way of knowing about the planning of anything.

JOHNSON: Well, how did it run? Did it seem as though things were running smoothly?

COLBURN: On that march? Oh, yes. I guess the march was okay, except that the path shown on the aerial photgraph ended at a river. One of my buddies got lost during the time in the woods. It being strange territory and swampy, he got separated from the group. He was lost for, I think three days. Finally he wandered back. We couldn't find him, but he wandered back into camp. He had trench feet and was in very bad condition.

LENNING: Do you remember his name?

COLBURN: Clifford Nelson.

JOHNSON: Was Major Young commanding at that time?

COLBURN: I believe so.

JOHNSON: Do you remember anything about him?

COLBURN: No.

JOHNSON: Do you remember anything about Major Nichols?

COLBURN: One incident that stands out in my memory occurred after the battle on November 4th. Captain Winslow appointed me as runner to deliver a message to Major Nichols back at Headquarters. I reached Headquarters at 11:25 p.m.. I have never felt so big and so conspicuous as I did there, running through the snow after dark along the railroad track. I felt like I was a moving target.

JOHNSON: What do you remember about Lt. Gordon Reese?

COLBURN: He was a nice lieutenant. I think he was the third platoon. Lieutenant Danley was my platoon lieutenant, and I think we were the fourth platoon.

JOHNSON: When you were fighting the Bolsheviks, did they have better weapons and more troops than the Americans?

COLBURN: Oh, we were greatly outnumbered. However, if they'd been better they'd have won. But we came out victorious, so it must be we were superior.

JOHNSON: Do you mean that you were victorious at the battle at Obozerskaya?

COLBURN: I mean we were not only successful at Obozerskaya, but we were successful in our entire mission.

JOHNSON: Did you ever have to attack the Bolsheviks without ammunition?

COLBURN: No.

JOHNSON: Were the Cossacks fighting alongside you?

COLBURN: Cossacks? I can't give you any information on that. I don't know. They were fighting, but I don't know where.

JOHNSON: When did you first go back to Archangel from the front?

COLBURN: November 23 until December 5, when we left to go to the front again. My last engagement was April the first. We were quartered in Number One Blockhouse on the left flank at Verst 446, when on April 1 at 7:40 a.m. we were attacked by what we found out later to be about two hundred fresh troops from Yempsie. There were eight men besides myself in the blockhouse: Harvey Menteer with a Lewis gun and three helpers, Tony Cialkowski, Alfred Becker, and Frank McCauley; I with a Vickers gun had four helpers, Richard Kleiber, Howard Kroenski, Louis Stemptzyk, and Usterboski.

With the two machine guns and the rifles using rifle grenades, we were able to hold them off until we were rescued by the French artillery at the rear. After an hour and a quarter of exchange of fire, the Bolos retreated. We patrolled the area and found out that these troops had spent the night in the woods, just waiting to make their attack at daybreak. We had had a sentry out front for watch, and he came in and reported to me that he saw movements out in the forest. So we all stood to and got ready for action. I don't know what time it was, but soon after he came in and reported that he saw movement, why, of course we got ready for action.

Our field of fire in the blockhouse was very narrow where our machine guns were set up on our bunks. There were supports in the middle of the walls to keep the logs from falling down. We had to knock out those supports so we

could have full coverage of the entire front. So that we did; and when we opened fire, it was pretty nerve-wracking at first, naturally. We thought when we saw them coming we would be overcome, but we kept coverage with rifle fire and we got word back to the French artillery of our predicament. Then the French opened up with their artillery, and they covered our area with shellfire. The first round fell within maybe thirty-forty feet of our blockhouse. We thought then that possibly the Bolos had gotten our location and it was enemy fire. But it turned out to be the French artillery. They covered both rear corners of the blockhouse first and then the front corners of the blockhouse, and then worked back and forth like that. And that drove the Bolos back.

After the battle we went out to survey the results, and there were many, many casualties. There was some personal property brought in of various kinds. And there was one captured. He reported that there were around two hundred men that came down and spent that night in the forest just ahead of us. So it was the artillery that saved us.

JOHNSON: And that was your last engagement?

COLBURN: Yes, that was April the first. That was when I was taken sick from exposure, and from then on I was relieved from the front and was taken back to the hospital.

JOHNSON: How were you transported to the hospital?

COLBURN: Well, of course from the front we went back in a boxcar. There were other casualties and patients, and we all were loaded onto droshkis and taken back to the hospital.

JOHNSON: Did you feel that your medical care was adequate?

COLBURN: Yes, it sure had to be, because I was placed in the death ward over-

night and I survived, so I think I had pretty good medical care.

LENNING: When did you first get into Archangel?

COLBURN: Right at Archangel, the fourth of September.

LENNING: But didn't you leave immediately down the railroad?

COLBURN: Yes, we did.

LENNING: So you didn't really see much of the city then?

COLBURN: Oh no. Not at that time. We didn't see anything of the city until after we were relieved from the front for the first time.

LENNING: When was that?

COLBURN: I think we were on the front the first time about a week, and then we were relieved and dropped back a short distance for a rest. Then we got to Archangel on November 24.

LENNING: What was initial reaction of the Archangel residents to you as an American soldier?

COLBURN: Well, we were received and treated very well. We had no complaint of the natives.

LENNING: What were your first impressions of the city?

COLBURN: Of Archangel? Well, it was far from being a modern city. The streets were very poor. Housing was very poor--that is, where we were. Of course, there are some very nice places. I can remember visiting one place that was very up-to-date and attractive. But the majority of the places where we were housed or where we visited weren't so good.

LENNING: What were your first duties in Archangel?

COLBURN: Well, our first duty was guard duty until we were loaded for the front. It was routine guard duty around our headquarters. Of course, you're never idle in the army. You've always got something to do. It was either guard duty, or training, or issuing--something--until we were loaded to go to the front.

LENNING: Were you trained to be a machine-gunner when you were in Archangel?

COLBURN: I took machine gun training in England, so I knew machine gun work at that time.

LENNING: What did guard duty entail?

COLBURN: Oh, it was just patrol and watch for any intruders.

LENNING: What would you do with intruders?

COLBURN: They were halted and questioned. But that isn't usual around camp.

LENNING: Did you ever capture any prisoners while in the city?

COLBURN: In the city? No.

LENNING: Did you encounter any Bolsheviks at all in Archangel?

COLBURN: No.

LENNING: So most of the residents in the city were not Bolsheviks?

COLBURN: No, the Bolos' base was in Vladivostok--this was their headquarters.

LENNING: How much did you know about the political situation in the city of Archangel?

COLBURN: I didn't know very much about the political situation in Archangel. I do know that there were three leaders there. They were Vladimir Lenin, Aleksandr Keremsky, and Leon Trotsky. There were three different heads of governments during the time I was there.

LENNING: In the city of Archangel itself, who was in power there?

COLBURN: I don't know if there were any Bolsheviks in the city of Archangel.

LENNING: So who ruled there?

COLBURN: I wouldn't know that either.

LENNING: Did you stay in barracks when you were in Archangel?

COLBURN: Really, I don't recall just how we were housed in Archangel. We had headquarters, where the supplies were. I can't tell you exactly how we were housed in Archangel. I don't recall that.

JOHNSON: Did you ever stay in a Russian family's home?

COLBURN: Yes.

JOHNSON: How did they react to your presence?

COLBURN: Pretty good.

JOHNSON: Were they friendly?

COLBURN: Yes, they were friendly. I do recall some homes where the kids slept on top of the fireplace. And they housed pigs under it, under the kids. So there were pigs and kids in the same house. (laughter) May seem hard to believe, but it was hard for me to believe it, too.

JOHNSON: Was the peasants' treatment of the Americans different from their

treatment of the other Allies?

COLBURN: I don't think so. I don't believe it. I wasn't aware of it.

JOHNSON: Then they were friendly to everyone?

COLBURN: Yes.

JOHNSON: Did their attitude change while you were there?

COLBURN: No, I don't think so. I thought their attitude was very agreeable all the time.

JOHNSON: How much did you know of the purpose of your mission at that time?

COLBURN: We didn't know anything about it. We didn't know any reason for it. We didn't know why we were sent to Russia. Supposedly to do guard duty at the supply depot, but instead of doing guard duty we did active engagements.

JOHNSON: How did you feel about that? Did you think there was anything wrong with your orders?

COLBURN: We just didn't think we were doing what we were sent there for.

LENNING: How did you come to fight the Bolsheviks? Who told you that they were your enemy?

COLBURN: I don't know.

LENNING: You just fought them?

COLBURN: Yes.

JOHNSON: Did you know that the Americans were put under British command on the condition that they would not be involved in Russia's civil war?

COLBURN: Yes, I've heard that talked . . .

JOHNSON: But you had no idea at that time, right? (He shakes head) Did you ever have any suspicions that what you were doing might not be in accordance with what you had been sent there for?

COLBURN: No, the general run of the soldiers do not know those things. They aren't in the "know" line for such information.

JOHNSON: Was there ever any dissent among the soldiers? Did they ever question the authority that made them fight?

COLBURN: Yes. Yes, they did. I guess that was resolved all right.

JOHNSON: On March 30, there was an alleged mutiny in your company.

COLBURN: Well, yes.

JOHNSON: Could you tell me what happened?

COLBURN: No.

LENNING: Were you there at the time when there was supposedly some problems in your company?

COLBURN: Yes.

JOHNSON: Don't you remember what went on at all?

COLBURN: Well, not too much. But I don't care to remember it.

JOHNSON: What kind of clothing did you have?

COLBURN: Well, we had good clothing. We were issued real heavy overcoats and--what did they call those big shoes we wore? And heavy socks.

LENNING: Shackleton boots?

COLBURN: That's it. Shackleton boots.

JOHNSON: Were you pretty warm most of the time?

COLBURN: Oh, yes. Not too bad. However, when on guard duty, we changed guards every fifteen minutes. It was fifty-two below zero.

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